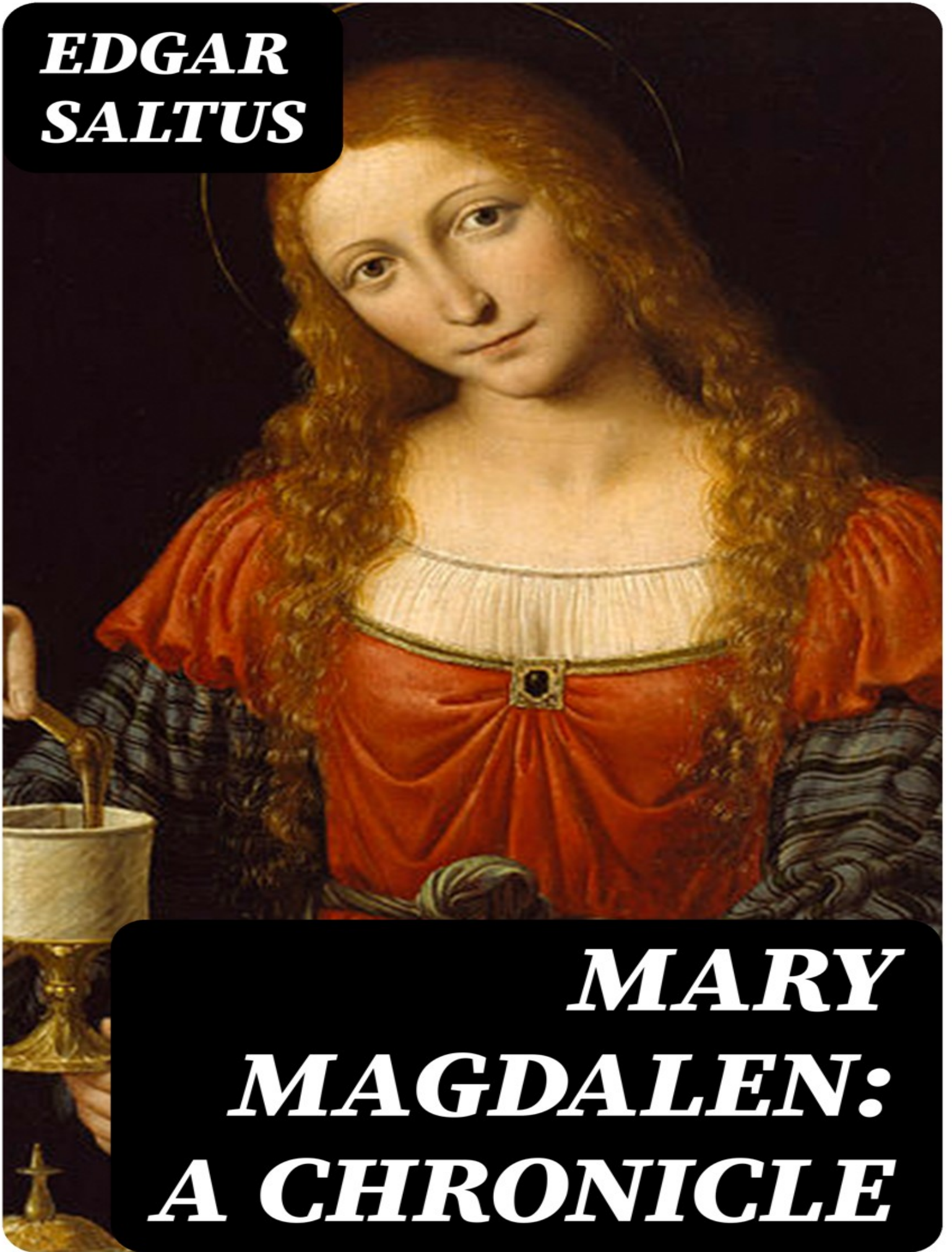
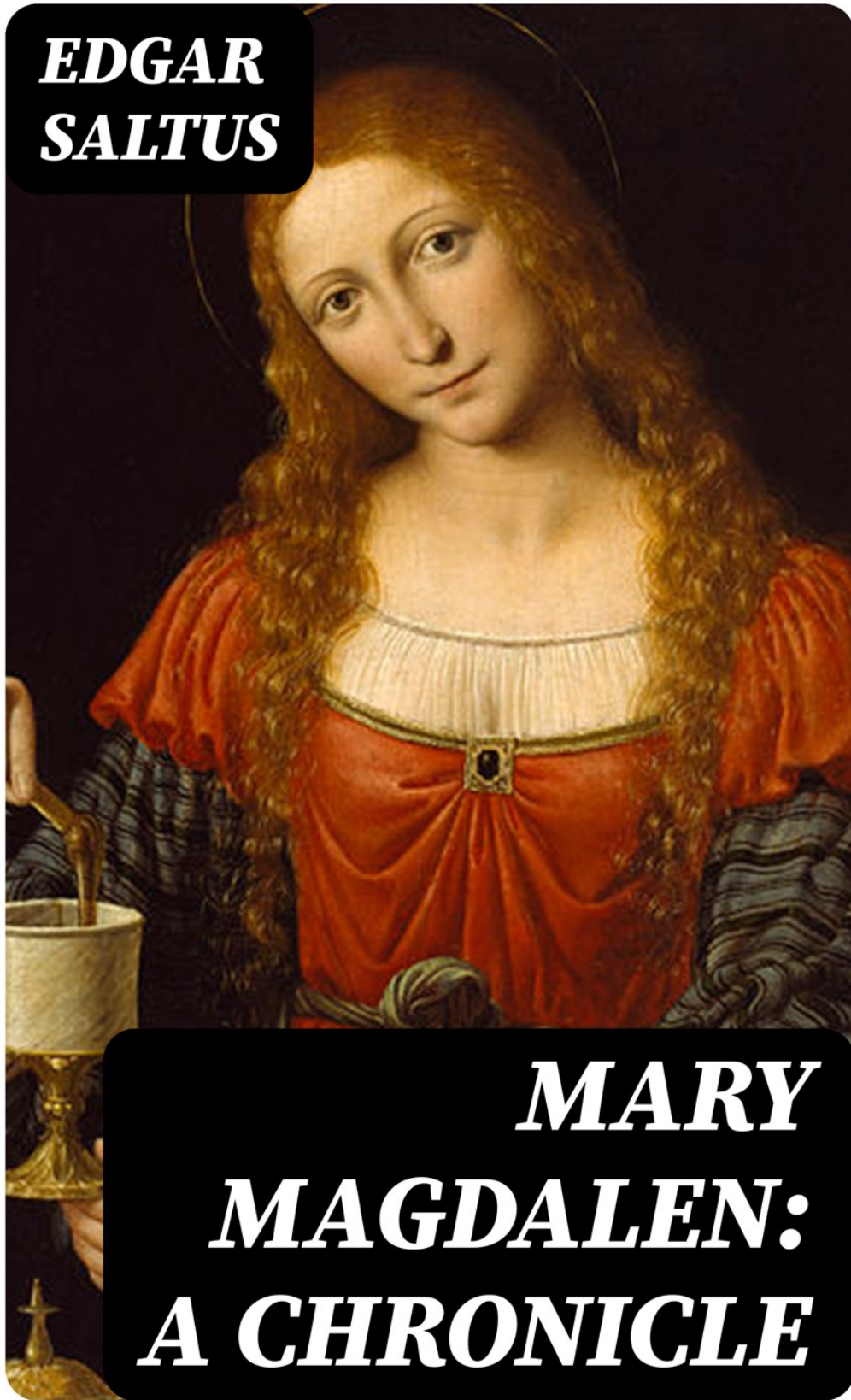


***EDGAR  
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***MARY  
MAGDALEN:  
A CHRONICLE***

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**Edgar Saltus**

# **Mary Magdalen: A Chronicle**

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# CHAPTER I.

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I.

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“Three to one on Scarlet!”

Throughout the brand-new circus were the eagerness, the gesticulations, shouts, and murmurs of an impatient throng. On a ledge above the entrance a man stood, a strip of silk extended in his finger-tips. Beneath, on either side, were gates. About him were series of ascending tiers, close-

packed, and brilliant with multicolored robes and parasols. The sand of the track was very white: where the sunlight fell it had the glitter of broken glass. In the centre was a low wall; at one end were pillars and seven great balls of wood; at the other, seven dolphins, their tails in the air. The uproar [pg 20]mounted in unequal vibrations, and stirred the pulse. The air was heavy with odors, with the emanations of the crowd, the cloy of myrrh. Through the exits whiffs of garlic filtered from the kitchens below, and with them, from the exterior arcades, came the beat of timbrels, the click of castanets. Overhead was a sky of troubled blue; beyond, a lake.

“They are off!”

The strip of silk had fluttered and fallen, the gates flew open, there was a rumble of wheels, a whirlwind of sand, a yell that deafened, and four tornadoes burst upon the track.

They were shell-shaped, and before each six horses tore abreast. Between the horses' ears were swaying feathers; their manes had been dyed clear pink, the forelocks puffed; and as they bounded, the drivers, standing upright, had the skill to guide but not the strength to curb. About their waists the reins were tied; at the side a knife hung; from the forehead the hair was shaven; and every[pg 21]thing they wore, the waistcoat, the short skirt, the ribbons, was of one color, scarlet, yellow, emerald, or blue: and this color, repeated on the car and on the harness, distinguished them from those with whom they raced.

Already the cars had circled the hippodrome four times. There were but three more rounds, and Scarlet, which in the beginning had trailed applause behind it as a torch trails smoke, lagged now a little to the rear. Green was leading. Its leadership did not seem to please; it was cursed at and abused, threatened with naked fist; yet when for the sixth time it turned the terminal pillar, a shout that held the thunder of Atlas leaped abroad. Where the yellow car, pursued by the blue, had been, was now a mass of sickening agitation—twelve fallen horses kicking each other into pulp, the drivers brained already; and down upon that barrier of blood and death swept the scarlet car. In a second it veered and passed; in that second a flash of steel had out the reins, and, as the car swung [pg 22]round, the driver, released, was tossed to the track. What then befell him no one cared. Stable-men were busy there; the car itself, unguided, continued vertiginously on its course. If it had lagged before, there was no lagging now. The hoofs that beat upon the ring plunged with it through the din down upon Emerald, and beyond it to the goal. And as the last dolphin vanished and the seventh ball was removed, the palm was granted, and the spectators shouted a salutation to the giver of the games—Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee.

He was superb, this Antipas. His beard was like a lady's fan. On his cheeks was a touch of alkanet; his hair, powdered blue, was encircled by a diadem set with gems. About his shoulders was a mantle that had a broad purple border; beneath it was a tunic of yellow silk. Between the railing of the tribune in which he sat one foot was visible, shod with badger's skin, dyed blood-red. He was superb, but



his eyelids drooped. He had a straight nose and a retreating fore[pg 23]head, a physiognomy that was at once weak and vicious. He looked melancholy; it may be that he was bored. At the salutation, however, he affected a smile, and motioned that the games should continue. And as the signals, the dolphins and the seven balls, appeared again, his thoughts, forsaking the circus, went back to Rome.

Insecure in the hearts of his people, uncertain even of the continued favor of the volatile monster who was lounging then in his Caprian retreat, it was with the idea of pleasing the one, of flattering the other, that he had instituted the games. For here in his brand-new Tiberias, a city which he had built in a minute, whose colonnades and porticoes he had bought ready-made in Rome, and had erected by means of that magic which only the Romans possessed—in this capital of a parvenu was a mongrel rabble of Greeks, Cypriotes, Egyptians, Cappadocians, Syrians, and Jews, whose temper was uncertain, and whose rebellion to be feared.

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*Annonâ et spectaculis* indeed! Antipas knew the dictum well; and with an uprising in the yonderland, and a sedition under his feet, what more could he do than quell the first with his mercenaries, and disarm the second with his games? Tiberius, whom he emulated, never deigned to appear at the hippodrome; it was a way he had of showing his contempt for a nation. Antipas might have imitated his sovereign in that, only he was not sure that Tiberius would take the compliment as it was meant. He might view such

abstention as the airs of a trumpery tetrarch, and depose him there and then. He was irascible, and when displeased there were dungeons at his command which reopened with difficulty, and where existence was not secure. Ah, that sausage of blood and mud, how he feared and envied him! An emperor now, a god hereafter, truly the dominion of this world and a part of the next was a matter concerning which fear and envy well might be.

And as Antipas' vagabond fancy roamed [pg 25]in and out through the possibilities of the Caesar's sway, unconsciously he thought of another monster, the son of a priest of Ascalon, who had defied the Sanhedrim, won Cleopatra, murdered the woman he loved the most, conquered Judæa and found it too small for his magnificence—of that Herod in fact, his own father, who gave to Jerusalem her masterpiece of marble and gold, and meanwhile, drunk with the dream of empire, had made himself successor of Solomon, Sultan of Israel, King of the Jews, and who, even as he died, had vomited death and crowns, diadems and crucifixions.

It was through his legacy that Antipas ruled. The kingdom had been sliced into three parts, of one of which Augustus had made a province; over another a brother whom he hated ruled; and he had but this third part, the smallest yet surely the most fair. Its unparalleled garden surrounded him, and its eye, the lake, was just beyond. In the amphitheatre the hills formed was a city of [pg 26]pink and blue marble, of cupolas, porticoes, volutes, bronze doors, and copper roofs. Along the fringe of the shore were Choraizin and

Bethsaïda, purple with pomegranates, Capharnahum, beloved for its honey, and Magdala, scented with spice. The slopes and intervalles were very green where they were not yellow, and there were terraces of grape, glittering cliffs, and a sky of troubled blue, wadded with little gold-edged clouds.

Yes, it was paradise, but it was not monarchy. It was to that he aspired. As he mused, a rancid-faced woman decked with paint and ostrich-plumes snarled in his ear:

“What have you heard of Iohanah?”

And as with a gesture he signified that he had heard nothing, she snarled again.

Antipas turned to her reflectively, but it was of another that he thought—the brown-eyed bride that Arabia had given him, the lithe-limbed princess of the desert whose heart had beaten on his own, whom he had loved with all the [pg 27]strength of youth and weakness, and whom he had deserted while at Rome for his brother’s wife, his own niece, Herodias, who snarled at his side.

Behind her were her women, and among them was one who, as the cars swept by, turned her head with that movement a flower has which a breeze has stirred. Her eyes were sultry, darkened with stibium; on her cheek was the pink of the sea-shell, and her lips made one vermilion rhyme. The face was oval and rather small; and though it was beautiful as victory, the wonder of her eyes, which looked the haunts of hope fulfilled, the wonder of her

mouth, which seemed to promise more than any mortal mouth could give, were forgotten in her hair, which was not orange nor flame, but a blending of both. And now, as the cars passed, her thin nostrils quivered, her hand rose as a bird does and fluttered with delight.

On the adjacent tiers were Greeks, fat-calved Cypriotes, Cappadocians with flowers painted on their skin, red Egyptians, Thracian mercenaries, Galilean fishermen, and a group of Lydians in women's clothes.

On the tier just beyond was a man gazing wistfully at the woman that sat behind Herodias. He was tall and sinewy, handsome with the comeliness of the East. His beard was full, unmarred at the corners; his name was Judas. Now and then he moistened his under lip, and a Thracian who sat at his side heard him murmur "Mary" and some words of Syro-Chaldaic which the Thracian did not understand.

To him Mary paid no attention. She had turned from the track. An officer had entered the tetrarch's tribune and addressed the prince. Antipas started; Herodias colored through her paint. The latter evidently was pleased.

"Iohanan!" she exclaimed. "To Machærus with him! You may believe in fate and mathematics; I believe in the axe."

And questioningly Herodias looked at her husband, who avoided her look, yet [pg 29]signified his assent to the command she had given.

The din continued. From the tier beyond, Judas still gazed into the perils of Mary's eyes.

"Dear God," he muttered, in answer to an anterior thought, "it would be the birthday of my life."

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# CHAPTER II.

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## II.

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“O Prophet Iohanan, how fair you are!”

Iohanan was hideous. His ankles were in stocks, a chain about his waist was looped in a ring that hung from the wall. About his body were tattered furs, his hair was tangled, the face drawn and yellow. Vermin were visible on his person. His lips twitched, and his gums, discolored, were as those of

a camel that has journeyed too far. A tooth projected, green as a fresh almond is; the chin projected too, and from it on one side a rill of saliva dripped upon the naked breast. On the terrace he was a blur, a nightmare in a garden.

“Ah, how fair!”

Tantalizing as temptation, Mary stood just beyond his reach. Her eyes were full of compliments, her body was bent, [pg 34]and, the folds of her gown held back, she swayed a little, in the attitude of one cajoling a tiger. She was quite at home and at her ease, and yet prepared for instant flight.

Iohanan, or John—surnamed, because of practices of his, the Baptist—beckoned her to approach. In his eyes was the innocence that oxen have.

“My body is chained, but my soul is free!”

Mary made a pirouette, and through the terrace of the citadel the rattles on her ankles rang.

It was appalling, this citadel; it dominated the entire land. Perched on a peak of basalt, it overhung an abyss in which Asphaltitis, the Bitter Sea, lay, a stretch of sapphire to the sun. In the distance were the heights of Abraham, the crests of Gilead. Before it was the infinite, behind it the desert. At its base a hamlet crouched, and a path hewn in the rock crawled in zigzags to its gates. Irregular walls surrounded it, in some places a hundred cubits high, and in [pg 35]each of the many angles was a turret. Seen from below it was a

threat in stone, but within was a caress, one of those rapturous palaces that only the Orientals build. It was called Machærus. Peopled with slaves and legends, it was a haunt of ghosts and fierce delights.

And now as Mary tripped before the prophet the walls alone repelled. The terrace was a garden in which were lilies and sentries. For entrance there was a portal of red porphyry, above which was a balcony hemmed by a balustrade of yellow Numidian stone.

Against it Antipas leaned. He had been eyeing the desert in tremulous surmise. The day before, he had caught the glitter of lances, therewith spirals of distant smoke, and he had become fearful lest Aretas, that king of Arabia Petræa whose daughter he had deserted, might be meditating attack. But now there was nothing, at most a triangular mass speeding westwards, of which only the edges moved, and which he knew to be a flight of cranes.

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He took heart again and gazed in the valley below. It was the anniversary of his birth. To celebrate it he had invited the stewards of his lands, the notables of Galilee, the elect of Jerusalem, the procurator of Judæa, the emir of Tadmor, mountaineers and Pharisees, Scribes and herdsmen.

But in the valley only a few shepherds were visible. Along the ramparts soldiers paced. At the further end of the terrace a group of domestics was busy with hampers and luggage. The day was solemnly still, exquisitely clear; and